

# New Orleans provides more business

By Harry C. Alford  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

It seems like a decade, but it has only been 13 months since the major disaster Hurricane Katrina struck and the subsequent failed rescue. The city of New Orleans looked like a bombed out German city after World War II. But it wasn't a piece of history or a victim of a world war.

It was an American city that experienced the biggest administrative blunder and mismanagement in the history of this great nation; decades of malfeasance in the levee system, and a new Homeland Security Agency that was pitiful.

A city that had a population approaching 500,000 was reduced to a pile of debris and holding no more than 40,000. New Orleans was just about down for the count. However, changes have been slow, but changes have come.

Today, there are more than 200,000 resilient souls bringing the city back. Many won't return but there are significant numbers of new people coming to make a new start for themselves and join in the making of a new city. New Orleans is becoming economically diverse and appealing to a strong Black middle class.

Within the next decade, the city will exceed its old population of 500,000 and will have a much smaller percentage of poverty.

Employment and opportunities will be the main reasons.

Mayor Ray Nagin has, so far, lived up to his pledge of opening doors for Black-owned businesses. Historical procurements are taking place, and it has been made clear to the previous crew of "good ol' boys" that the times have changed.

Diversity in the procurement process is now real. It seems that every educated person we meet in New Orleans is thinking entrepreneurial. Either they want to participate in the business infrastructure of New Orleans or they want to assist via their professional roles in furthering the new environment along.

In the past, many minority businesses were denied growth because they weren't bondable. Major bids required surety bonds and they just weren't available to deserving minority businesses.

The main reason was that local insurance agents were discriminating in how they offered their policies. The National Black Chamber of Commerce and the Surety and Fidelity Association have identified minority agents around the nation to work with New Orleans minority contractors who win bids requiring bonding.



HARRY C. ALFORD

Contractors are now able to compare bonding rates and quotes. They have a choice of which company they are going to choose to grow with. Those who are not yet bondable are given technical assistance so that they can become bondable within a short period.

A bonding assistance program and a city that demands minority participation in every project reminds one of Maynard Jackson's Atlanta or Harold Washington's Chicago. Could New Orleans become the next "Boom Town" for Black-owned businesses? I feel it certainly can, and it is unfolding right before my eyes.

Now that the playing field is starting to level, the city is going to demand a good inventory of Black-owned businesses and entrepreneurs. The Housing Authority of New Orleans alone will issue contracts worth over \$5 billion in neighborhood building. This will have, as a minimum, 20 percent minority participation, 5 percent women business participation and 10 percent Section 3 (training and employment for people living under the poverty level).

Note that I said neighborhood building — not affordable housing. Major projects will require a mix of scattered single-family

homes, multi-family residents, quality school availability, retail areas and modern medical facilities. We are talking about the real deal! A quality of life for the residents of New Orleans is starting to take form.

In all, during the next 10 years, there is going to be at least \$70 billion in development and construction alone in New Orleans. From a new airport and Trump Towers to city infrastructure and levee protection, this city will be humming. At every turn, Black business will be involved. We are talking about a new Mecca for Black business. Are we ready?

Next year will be the call for qualified and bona fide architects, engineers, program managers, construction managers, contractors, realtors, investors, developers, trucking companies, landscapers, accountants, IT professionals and retail store operators. I can go on and on.

Also, and equally important, will be the fact that there will be an extremely high demand for employees. There are more jobs than workers right now and it will become more so in the coming years. This equates to great pay scales and consumable dollars for the local businesses. Business owners and hard workers, New Orleans wants you. Consider making a change.

Harry C. Alford is the President/CEO and co-founder of the National Black Chamber of Commerce.

# Achievement gap broadens as scores rise

By Marc H. Morial  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Back in 2002, President George W. Bush, with much pomp and circumstance, enacted the ambitious and controversial No Child Left Behind education law, which established a series of standards that schools and states must meet or face severe penalties.

Its ultimate goal was to by 2014 narrow the educational divide between African-American and White students — a noble idea but not necessarily one that the nation is having an easy time of achieving. Like a lot of political ideas with lofty expectations, the rhetoric doesn't always translate into effective laws, and there is rarely complete consensus on success rates.

Many times, it depends on how the statistics are spun.

"There are good results of No Child Left Behind across the nation," declared President Bush at a North Carolina school last month, giving assurances that "the gap is closing," the *New York Times* reported. At the other side of the spectrum, Michael T. Nettles, a senior vice president at the Educational Testing Service, recently informed an audience

at Columbia University that the divide is actually "showing very few signs of closing," according to the news story.

And even Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a group that advocated for No Child Left Behind, concluded that "poor and minority students are doing very poorly, and in most states, are not making significant gains," the *Times* reported.

This by no means implies that Black children have not made progress. They have — but incrementally, according to the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress otherwise known as the Nation's Report Card that gauges student achievement — just not enough to keep pace with their White counterparts, who are hardly breaking achievement records by any stretch of the imagination.

The difference the percentage of White and African-American students performing at an adequate level in both reading and math



MARC H. MORIAL

appears to be expanding, not closing — despite efforts to the contrary at the local, state and federal levels over the past 15 years.

From 1992 to 2005, the percentage of African-American fourth-graders who read at or above proficiency grew from 8 to 12 percent, according to the report card. Over the same period, the percentage of White students reading at the same level increased from 35 percent to 41 percent. Yet, as average achievement test scores improved, the chasm between adept White and Black readers widened by 1 percentage point — from 27 percent to 28 percent over the 1992-2005 period.

Where Black children show strong progress is on the mathematics front, an encouraging trend given the importance of technology in our nation's current and future economy. From 1990 to 2005, the percentage of African-American fourth graders scoring at or above proficiency soared more than 13-fold from 1 percent to 13 percent. But, once again, the gap between White and Black fourth graders with adequate math skills grew by four percentage points — from 20 percent to 24 percent points.

This is not to say that President Bush is completely wrong in his assessment. It's all in the way the statistics are interpreted. He is correct to some extent. From 2002 to 2003, the difference in percentage of White and Black fourth graders with sufficient reading skills actually did narrow but only after increasing the year before.

No Child Left Behind has helped us quantify the achievement gaps based on race — an important step. Regardless, the numbers are pretty gloomy even in the most optimistic light. Overall, more than 60 percent of

U.S. fourth- and eighth-grade students in 2005 failed to perform at their grade level in reading and math.

That's an embarrassment, to say the least, for the world's richest nation and bodes ominously for our future. How on earth can we expect our future work force to compete in a global economy against competitors with better-educated children?

A recent *New York Times* magazine story stopped just short of saying that No Child Left Behind is doomed to failure but suggested that if it did, we would only have ourselves to blame.

"We know now, in a way, that we did not when the law was passed, what it would take to make it work. And if the law does, in the end, fail — if in 2014 only 20 or 30 or 40 percent of the country's poor and minority students are proficient — then we will need to accept that its failure was not an accident and was not inevitable — but was the outcome we chose," concluded editor Paul Tough in the article.

Much like civil rights activists in the 1960s, we must seize control of our children's destiny. We cannot sit back and just expect our elected leaders to find a quick fix for a problem that took decades to develop. Just imagine if civil rights crusaders of the 1950s and 1960s had waited around for Uncle Sam to help ensure everyone's right to vote. Minorities in some parts of the South would still be taking literacy tests probably.

It is partially our responsibility as parents and members of the community to ensure that future generations acquire the skills needed to thrive in a dynamic and competitive world economy and to hold the powers that be accountable for their obligation to provide a good public education to all — regardless of color, religion or economic class.

Marc H. Morial is President and CEO of the National Urban League.

## Walters

(Continued from Page 8)

chair, that can often be neutralized; but if they have the leverage that the voting power of blacks made the difference in many elections, they can use it.

If those outside join the mobilizations, demonstrations, protests, civic activism of the movement, they can help their elected officials use it. But if they just sit and watch, then nothing from nothing leaves nothing, most of the time.

Ron Walters is Director of the African American Leadership Institute and Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland College Park.